

Collective Cravings

BY CARRIE GROSSMAN

Years ago I had a session with an intuitive healer. After resting in silence with my eyes closed for a few minutes, I looked over to see what she was doing. Seated on a stool beside the table, her eyes were open, staring at me.

“Do you like sugar?” she asked. It seemed an odd question. “I get the sense that you crave sweets.”

“Maybe sometimes,” I said. “But I’m not addicted or anything.” She nodded, as if she knew something I didn’t.

“Do you feel like you have a hard time being sweet to yourself?” I smiled in defense—what a ridiculous assumption!

Or was it?

On the way home I replayed her words, rolled my eyes, and then burst into tears. She was so right! Was that why I liked sweets so much? Maybe. Maybe not. It almost didn’t matter. What mattered was the painful reality that I was critical and disparaging toward my own heart. Just thinking about it made me want to eat an entire cake. Clearly, I craved something, but what?

Food gives us plenty of opportunities to learn about our crazy minds. For those of us lucky enough to afford groceries, we often eat just because we can. We eat when we’re tired. We eat when we’re bored. We eat when we’re stressed, anxious, or depressed. And this makes perfect sense. If we feel empty, we naturally want to fill ourselves up, and food offers an easy, convenient way to do so. It doesn’t hurt that we merely have to look at something delicious to experience a rise in dopamine, the neurotransmitter associated with pleasure. There’s no question that food is powerful, never mind essential. It nourishes, enchants, and unites us. It woos us with its beautiful colors and reconnects us with the sensual world.

At the same time, food is complicated. Each day new findings emerge about what we should and shouldn’t eat, resulting in a mo-



ross of contradiction. Raw or macro? Dairy or vegan? Cane sugar, honey, agave, stevia, maple syrup, or molasses? It’s a wonder the breatharian movement hasn’t caught on yet, as subsisting on sunlight would certainly make things simpler. Since that likely won’t happen anytime soon, how are we to determine the best foods for our unique constitutions? Generally speaking, we know that whole foods are best—anything grown in the earth, as opposed to a manufacturing plant—but these days, even fruits and vegetables are causes for concern. Pesticides, GMOs, heavy metals, and endless other issues contribute to an ever-growing list of things to avoid, making a trip to the grocery store an exhausting affair.

Of course, the fact that we even have the option to choose our desired cuisine shines a blinding light on our privilege. According to a 2010 report by the Food and Agriculture Organization, 925 million people don’t have enough to eat; that’s more than the combined populations of the United States, European Union, and Canada. Of these hungry people, 98 percent live in developing countries where even clean water is lacking.

Sadly, conditions are such that this situation may not soon change. Rising oil prices, population growth, and the dominance of big companies are leading to an increase in food prices worldwide. As if that isn’t enough, extreme weather, soil pollution, and the loss of arable land are affecting crop yields. If this keeps up, some suggest we may be in for a global food shortage, though it seems we are already in

one. If nearly one billion starving or severely undernourished people don’t indicate a food crisis, what does?

The unfortunate reality is that there is actually more than enough food to feed everyone on the planet, but we have chosen to satisfy our gluttonous palates instead. Rather than grow grain for human consumption, we feed it to animals so we can enjoy the taste of meat. Rather than eat smaller portions, we gorge ourselves and still often end up throwing out half the food on our plate. In fact, the U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that up to one-fifth of food in the U.S. goes to waste each year; just 5 percent of those food scraps would provide a day’s worth of food to four million people.

Indeed, one person’s hunger is *everyone’s* hunger, even if it’s hard to see. Hunger can create problems that extend beyond every border—disease, terrorism, violence, displacement—and in a world as interconnected as ours, issues like these directly impact each one of us. At the same time, many of us surrounded by food remain hungry. Sometimes, no matter how much we shovel it in, we still don’t feel truly sated. That’s because our desires are endless. Even if we eat the most scrumptious meal, our contentment lasts only a short while. In no time we are on to the next thing, looking for some new delight to distract us from our discontent.

In the six realms of existence depicted in Tibetan Buddhist iconography, the realm of the hungry ghosts is characterized by intense crav-

ing. The poor beings in this realm have huge, bloated bellies and long, thin necks. They want desperately to eat but cannot swallow, and are constantly tormented by unfulfilled desires. While on the outside, we may appear a bit more functional than these creatures, internally we too have unlimited, unquenchable desires. We hunger not only for food, but people, possessions, power, purpose, and prestige. We spend our days ingesting information online and chasing down fantasies, imagining that their attainment will make us happy. But rarely do we ever feel fulfilled.

The word *hunger* has its roots in the Indo-European *kenk*, “to burn, be dry.” Isn’t it true that when we hunger, it often feels like we are burning up inside? We want something, and the friction caused by our desire makes us smolder with restlessness. By contrast, freedom is a kind of fullness, an inner contentment that doesn’t require anything other than what is here now. Freedom is spaciousness—the ability to smile at our desires, not be enslaved by them.

What are we so hungry for anyway? Mother Teresa offered a simple answer: love. And the hunger for love, she said, “is much more difficult to remove than the hunger for bread.” Oh, if we could only buy the love and sweetness we so desire at the supermarket! But unlike much of our food, true love doesn’t come packaged in cellophane. Love is limitless and nourishes us far more than any wheatgrass or goji berry can. While one harvest can’t sustain us forever, the orchard of love in our heart bears perpetual fruit. As Van Morrison rightly sang: *Spiritual hunger and spiritual thirst/But you got to change it/On the inside first/To be satisfied.*

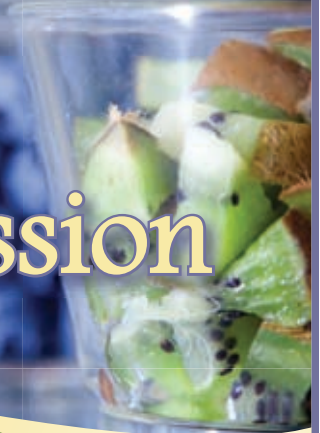
Ultimately, food points us toward something greater than ourselves; it begs us to reflect on Mary Oliver’s words: *What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?* Doesn’t that question strike at the real source of our hunger? Certainly, we have more to offer the world than our disposable coffee cups and apple cores. By giving us the energy we need, food invites us to contemplate the gift of our embodiment. While it may not be possible to question our life purpose every time we take a bite, perhaps once in awhile we can pause and consider why we are here: to discover who we are or to simply appreciate the beauty of rain and stars. Perhaps once in awhile we can remember that food is here to serve us so that we may serve each other. Then, filled with the light of love, we can illuminate this world. 🍃

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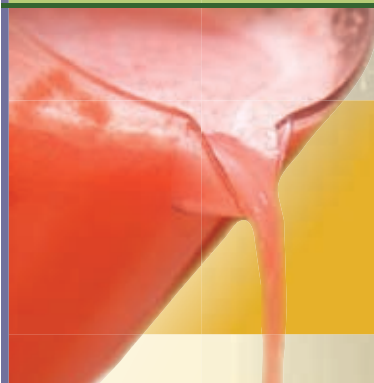
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